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March 9th

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An
Inaugural Essay
on
Dysentery
By
John Russell
of
Pennsylvania.

admitted March 22d 1821.

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The prevalence of Dysentery in Adams County, Penna during
three years of my apprenticeship to the Study of Medicine,
its varied appearance in each of those years, & the consequent
diversity of treatments, adapted to its cure, as well as the be-
lief early inculcated, that the knowledge of treating success-
fully any one form of disease, according to rational principles,
enables the person so endowed, to encounter every other which
can present itself. have necessarily directed my attention pecu-
liarly to this disorder, these reasons have influenced me in a-
dopting Dysentery as the subject of the following essay,
altho' a hackney'd theme, of which, not the least is that I
have been enabled to draw on the experience of my mas-
ter, who has for this purpose given me every facility by his oral
remarks & the inspection of his manuscript journals. Thus,
I trust, my essay will assume, at least, the appearance of
novelty, & the writer not reproachable with the crime of
wearing your attention by presenting you the mere glean-
ings of a limited reading of works of standard merit &
universal acquaintance.

At one time, I intended, exhibiting a minute history of this

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disorder during the years 1817, 18, & 20, within the preceding,
accompanying & succeeding forms of disease, and also accom-
panying meteorological tables, but on reflecting that essays
of this kind are designed merely as tests of the Candidates
talents and acquirements, and that it would be a presumption
in the highest degree to aim at instructing learned professors,
I concluded that brevity would be the most acceptable
mark of my respect. I have, therefore rendered my observa-
tions as concise as possible.

The Spring of 1817 was unusually wet; the summer season
remarkable for the number of heavy showers, but with intervals
of excessive heats and Autumn set in with unaccustomed
colds. The Dysentery made its appearance in the latter days
of June & gradually increased in the number of cases and
the severity of symptoms until suddenly arrested by a con-
spicuous fall of rain & subsequent frost late in August; after
which there arose a few occasional cases, with more amelio-
rated symptoms until the middle of October when it wholly
subsided. Vegetation was very luxuriant, & in the limestone
districts in which the disease arose & was principally confined.

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being flat & watered by small streams & rivulets ascending from the mountains, the grass & weeds from too luxuriant a growth having early fallen down, obstructed in many places the small water courses & thus produced unusual & large marshes on which the summer sun must necessarily have generated miasmata & impregnated the waters themselves with deleterious matters. That the disease of this year was indebted for its causation to marsh miasmata & unwholesome water, is inferable from the fact that it never extended more than half a mile from some low marshy lands or mountain streams.

Its usual mode of attack was by chilly, great languor & depression, crampy pains concentrating in the Abdomen, fever, with full, tense pulse, furred tongue & flushing of face; diarrhoea in a few hours terminating in distressing tenesmus with bloody stools. The pain at first wore the stamp of colic, but after some time abated in severity and descended to the lower part of the abdomen & pelvis, & generally induced extensive prolapus ani. In some, the first symptom was the pain of the bowels; in others, the bloody stools & a few there were, who seemed to labour under fever of a bilious na-

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ture (such as had been customary in prior years) for several days
before the Dysenteric symptoms evinced themselves. There also
occurred many other varieties in the form of attack & still more
diverse peculiarities in the progress, but in all the stools ap-
peared, principally composed of blood of a peculiarly pun-
gent color & defluencies of a mucous or sanguineo-mucous
nature were rare. Strangury after a few days continuance of
the disease was no uncommon symptom, & altho' to the pa-
tient very alarming, yet to the Physician always pleasing as
a certain precursor of speedy recovery.

The treatment found most successful, was in the first stages,
bleeding until a reduction in the pulsing, frequency & tension
of the pulse was effected: followed immediately by brisk
exhaustives, as *Op. Calomel gr. x. Sulph. gr. xx. M. or R. Calomel*
gr. xx. R. Rhubarb gr. xxv. M. or Calomel gr. x. + xx. assidue by St.
Revini ℥i to be repeated every hour until the bowels are freely
evacuated, or by some of the Neutral Salts, as *Sulph. lodæ ℥. disphos.*
in ℥vi of Sipia water, or Sulph. Magnesia or R. Sol. Soda ℥. Cam.
Sect. ℥ss. boiling water ℥vi. one Spoon full to be taken every hour
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balls alone were adequate to the intention, but it was most advisable to premise the Calomel. After catharsis had been effected it was always advisable to procure quietude by Opates as—
Tinct. Op. gutt. XL, or Tinct. Op. Camph. ʒj repeated every hour until the design was accomplished. If afterwards it was found by a continuance or recurrence of the symptoms, that the bowels had not been sufficiently relaxed & evacuated, the purging must be repeated daily until all the retained faeces shall have been voided, the febrile action reduced, the pain & other symptoms mitigated, & the patient shall experience more debility, then & not till their recovery may be prescribed for, by ordering Tonics, as decoction of Jonkine, Valerian, & Columbo, in some cases with wine & water, but mostly it was hazardous to use any active stimuli; & invigorating diet was for the most part, all that was required. If the venous blood still continued into the congested state, they might be safely restrained by astringents & the pain alleviated by Opates for which purpose Kino combined with Opium answered very well. If costiveness should have supervened it must be promptly obviated, as its direct tendency was to a relapse.

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To keep the bowels ~~open~~ ^{free} nothing more was necessary than
cream of tartar, whey, melasses & water or an occasional dose of
Castor oil; or where the patient was under the use of Opium
to mingle his boluses with rhubarb to render them slightly
laxative. To relieve the prolapsus, it was expedient to anoint the
protruded part with an unguent composed of Kino & Gum in
powder rubbed down in simple acetate, & then gently restore the
part to its wonted situation. When the protruded parts were so
much swollen as to prevent reduction, cold water frequently
used as a lotion often allayed the inflammation & some-
times relief from an exposure of the parts to the fumes of
Aster, thus to the vapour of the decoction of Mullen leaves.
Demulcent diet & drinks were at all times grateful & bene-
ficial; & there being little nausea, could be indulged in co-
piously. Blister or fomentations to the abdomen were rarely
necessary, as the disease, if promptly treated, generally
yielded to the foregoing plan; but there were cases which
had been trusted too long to nature or injudicious preve-
nives, which had assumed the Syphilitic state with so complete
a prostration of the energies of the system as to require all

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The Stimulants we sought to excite them in some such manner acted miraculously. If however they were applied whilst any inflammatory action existed, they certainly did harm. Sinapisms & even blisters to the extremities were admissible in almost every stage of the disorder, & were frequently attended with happy effects. Being mostly applied at night, in conjunction with the Opium, they created a centrifugal direction, known by an universal diaphoresis, from which there was no more certain criterion of a salutary crisis.

The summer of 1819 was very hot & dry, most of our small streams ceased to flow early in July & the deeper parts of their channels became pools of stagnant water. The spring had been unusually healthy, but June brought Cholera Morbus & Diarrhea, which prevailed until the latter part of July, when they yielded or rather passed into Dysentery, which continued increasing in violence till the middle of October, when it suddenly ceased. The disease of this year differed in many particulars from that of 1817. It was confined wholly to the red or slate lands, the limestone district being entirely exempt from it. It was accompanied with nausea &

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vomiting in the first instance, & more or less irritability of
Stomach accompanied until its close. The prostration of
strength was greater & more immediate. The stools were a
mixture of blood & mucus. The pain was higher seated in
the umbilical region, there was greater tenderness to the touch,
so much so as often ^{to} force screams from the patient. The struc-
ture of the intestines ^{was} more irritable & the difficulty of appar-
ing was greater. The skin was yellow, very dry & husky &
more difficultly equated to diaphoresis. The countenance indi-
cated greater anguish. The mortality was much greater &
probably owing to mistaken notions as to the kind & quantity
of treatment necessary, it having been so simple in the
preceding year, that many persons believed themselves
capable of curing it without the aid of physicians & con-
fidently trusted to a dose of Castor oil & afterwards a decooc-
tion of Bear root. The disease would often yield partially
to a cathartic, and after a truce of a few hours commence
more or terminating hostility. Hence the source of many fatal
mistakes, the bowels having yielded part of their embarrassing
contents, led to the belief that entire evacuation had been

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affected, but even where the natural faeces were voided freely
by a cathartic, it was necessary to repeat them as long as
they brought off matter wearing marks of having lain longer
than natural; & until the griping & unnatural stools were cor-
rected. It was always necessary to commence the treatment
by emetics, because the Stomach required to be thoroughly
evacuated before any other remedies could be exhibited, & then
well known antispasmodic action tended much to the fa-
cility of overcoming the constriction of the upper intestines.
They might be repeated several times in the progress of the
disease, & particularly if the Stomach became fastidious
& refused other articles. It was of less requisite to repeat
them three or four times in the first stages, & had no bad
effects in the latter. Bleeding was rarely admissible.
Blisters this season were frequently used to overcome
the excessive irritability of the Stomach, and always with
the desired effect. They were generally applied on the Sternum
Cris, & were frequently kept discharging on into convalescence.
Emollient & antispasmodic injections were valuable auxiliaries
(purgatives) at bed time & whenever the pain was great & the pas-

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lient not under the operation of cathartics, was indispensable,
& it proved more grateful in substance & in tincture. Abri-
ngents were inadmissible in every stage, & even the mildest Ories
could not be exhibited with safety were it not also used

1820 was still more dry and hot than the fore-
going, there having fallen but little rain during the winter
& spring, in early summer we began to experience the effects
of the excessive drought. Water was scarce & bad in all si-
tuations, but in the uplands, where it was in ordinary quan-
ty & good, the inhabitants suffered more from the reverse than
those not accustomed to such favours, hence, probably the
Opuntia was restricted, this season, to the mountains &
highlands & those of the lower districts & who had suf-
fered from its ravages the preceding year, were now
honoured by its visit. It was ushered in this year with
all the pomp of virulence it had acquired in its almost
vigour the last year, & in a few weeks acquired its acme,
from which there was no abatement in its after courses.
It arose with August & existed until December, not-
withstanding the heavy rains & subsequent early frosts

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of October & November. Intermitting fever also prevailed
& the Dysentery sometimes assumed its robes. It was strictly
the *Morbus Mucofus*, the stools were but very slightly tinged
with blood & the quantity of mucus was astonishingly co-
pious. Altho' tenesmus was agonizingly severe, prolapsus
ani was unknown. There was generally a paroxysm of fever
in the afternoon, at which time the skin was jaundiced
& the scleroticæ of so saffron a die as to render the counte-
nance quite ferocious; in the exacerbation the skin altho'
not cool, was left hot & husky & the countenance pained &
even pitiful. The constipation was more intractable &
rarely yielded to cathartics, even of the most powerful
& frequently repeated.

The treatment of former years was in this inefficacious
after having been baffled in various plans by the violence
& obstinacy of the disorder, we had at length to resort to the
following powerful, but simple plan Calomel & Ipecac
in nauseating doses repeated every half hour until vomit-
ing or diarrhoea was produced. Emetic or Stomach
pills in the paroxysm which was usually in the afternoon

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At night or during the exacerbation doses of Calomel & opium given every hour until sleep or mitigation of pain was produced. If the Calomel & opium produced, early, strength of gums or salivation the disorder was instantly arrested & copious evacuations of brown feces, & a brownish black saliva & tenacious bile showed that Constriction was fulfilled. At this time a brisk cathartic (it made little difference what) was necessary to effect a thorough cleansing of the alimentary tube & induce the mercurial action & then the patient might be safely trusted to a skilful nurse to convalesce. No severe cases this year yielded to other treatment. Calomel could effect removal of obstruction & disengagement of redundant bile only by creating its peculiar mercurial action. Sometimes it took effect immediately, at others, particularly if the disease had been suffered to gain strength, its action was resisted for some days, but ultimately if persevered in, was uniformly successful. The discharge of black bile was the only certain precursor of amendment and guaranteed against death.

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The chief cause of the former very great fatality of this disease was the false supposition of its contagious nature, but happily this with many other ideas of traditional verities is yielding to reason & honest observation. This silly faith not only precluded the unhappy patients of the need of pains & comforts arising from good nursing & the confidence-inspiring presence of friends, but it deterred the Physician from obtaining that correct knowledge of the state of the disease; necessary to judicious prescriptions; hence the practice was empirical; the sufferer deprived of the sympathy of friendships & bereaved of every comfort, was permitted to sink to a neglected grave through a maze of his own accumulated fictions.

That the ignorant & timid & credulous should have long remained under the dominion of this absurd prejudice is not to be wondered at, but to the disgrace of the profession it must be acknowledged, that even yet there are some men whose so weak as to give it the countenance.

Was this essay designed for the public eye it might perhaps be proper to support by facts & reasons, my declaration

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that under its every form it is now contagious, but the learned
will gladly excuse the relation. If I mistake not there
are some & much too, renowned for learning & labours who
say that under the Syphus form it may be communicable
in answer I have only to remark, that in my native Country,
where it has prevailed under that form, experience boldly
contradicts such an Hypothesis

